Foresight as an innovative tool for designing tourist destinations

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Abstract

Foresight is a relatively new field of study which initially arose to make provisions for the future in science and technology, but nowadays it is increasingly being used in territorial issues. Although the use of foresight tools in the tourism realm has been limited, there is a growing need to manage the increasing uncertainty that surrounds tourism development. Based on these premises, this paper tries to prove the capability of foresight tools to anticipate the impacts of complex global challenges on the tourism field. This assumption is tested through a future vision exercise which explores the evolution of tourism demand segments and its implications in planning tourism destinations. Two major demand segments are visualised for the year 2020 horizon: "Niche and Innovative Demand" and "Massive and Predictable Demand". For both segments, the tourism consumption chain value is displayed and spatial design guidelines are recommended for sun and beach destinations.

Keywords: Future Studies, Foresight, Tourism Demand, Destination Design, Uncertainty.

Scarce Presence of Future Studies in Tourism Physical Planning

Although predicting the future has been a long-standing quest for Humanity, future studies, as a recognized field of scientific knowledge, have a mere half-century of existence. Since ancient times, man has been uneasy when facing uncertainty and has tried by different means to anticipate its future, by either prophesies enacted by priests or by rational thinking exercised by scientists. It was not until the 50's and 60's of the Twentieth Century that a formal body of knowledge began to be assembled under the tag of future studies, providing a new set of tools to researchers.

In general terms, the field of future studies encompasses two broad families of methods and techniques (Fernández Güell, 2006). On the one hand, **quantitative tools** make intense use of mathematical and statistical methods to predict the future. This sort of methods may use simple tools, such as trend extrapolation, or very sophisticated ones, such as computer simulation models. Quantitative methods are particularly effective when the continuity of past-present-future phenomena is assumed.

On the other hand, **qualitative tools** are mainly based upon opinions, intuitions and conjectures of experts, who have reliable and privileged information about the analysed topic. The most frequently employed methods within this category are the Delphi method, scenario design and trend analysis. Qualitative methods are particularly recommended when long-range structural changes are to be predicted and these changes are hard to capture by simple statistics.

Reaching this point, a distinction should be made between forecasting and foresight.

> 1) **Forecasting** visualizes the future as a unique and lineal evolutionary process based upon past experiences. The predicted future is clearly deterministic. Forecasts are mainly nurtured by quantitative tools.
>
> 2) **Foresight** contemplates the future made by complex, uncertain and multiple visions. The future is open and not predetermined. Foresight mostly employs qualitative tools.

Obviously, tourism planning has not been alien to the need of foreseeing the future and of limiting uncertainty. Since its inception in the middle of the Twentieth Century, tourism planning has made projections and anticipated trends in order to improve the design of destinations for the benefit of visitors, investors and local residents. Nevertheless, tourism planners have historically favoured the use of quantitative tools (forecasting) in detriment of qualitative tools (foresight) (Song & Li, 2008).

A recent review of diverse sources has revealed the scarcity of foresight exercises in the tourism realm, exhibiting the following findings. Firstly, international institutions, such as the World Tourism Organization (WTO) and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), are more centred in producing forecasts than in exploring qualitative scenarios. Nevertheless, both institutions have made partial incursions in the qualitative field by identifying megatrends with the purpose of producing quantitative forecasts, assessing developmental and marketing factors, and providing policy guidance (OECD, 2010; WTO, 2001).

Secondly, national tourism institutions, as the Spanish Ministry of Tourism, are beginning to make timid approaches into the foresight field. In the Tourism Plan Horizon 2020 (Consejo Español de Turismo, 2007), an evaluation was made of major trends that might affect the tourism sector in the future. A far more explicit foresight exercise was undertaken by Fundación OPTI in 2005, when future scenarios were designed for anticipating the evolution of tourism global demand and its implications in the Spanish business sector in the horizon of year 2015.

Thirdly, not much consulting or academic work has been performed regarding tourism foresight. A recent search in the European Foresight Platform, a European Commission funded body which has compiled nearly 500 foresight cases from all over the world, displayed that there was only one case in which future scenarios were designed for a tourist activity (Mittringer, 2005).

In brief, foresight tools are less used in the tourism realm than in other areas related to technological and socioeconomic studies. Tourism planners make abundant use of forecasting tools to project the number of visitors, the amount of revenues and the size of economic impacts (Goodwin, 2008), while they seem more reluctant to apply foresight methods, especially when it comes to planning and designing destinations. Under these circumstances, it is timely to ask whether it is convenient and feasible to bring over foresight methods and techniques to tourism planning for the sake of improving the design of destinations.

Foresight an Innovative Tool for Tourism Planning

Foresight is a relatively new field of study which initially arose to make provisions for the future in science and technology, but nowadays it is increasingly being used in territorial issues such as climate change, urban development and transport systems. According to several authors (Fernández Güell, 2011, FOREN, 2001; Gavigan and Scapolo, 2001), foresight, when applied to tackle territorial issues, may be defined as a systematic, participatory, future intelligence gathering and vision-building process aimed at taking present-day decisions and mobilizing joint actions in the territorial realm. In other words, foresight brings together key agents of change and sources of knowledge in order to develop strategic visions and anticipatory intelligence in a given territory.

Therefore, foresight involves the implementation of five essential elements:

1) ***Anticipation***. Foresight is a structured way to anticipate and project long-term social, economic and technological developments and needs.

2) ***Vision***. Foresight elaborates a guiding strategic vision, which shares a sense of social commitment about a certain issue.

3) ***Action***. Foresight develops and implements strategic visions through detailed action plans, which enable present actions to face the future successfully.

4) ***Participation***. Foresight intensively incorporates interactive and participatory methods that support debate and analysis with a wide variety of stakeholders.

5) ***Networking***. Foresight forges new social networks for the exchange of ideas, experiences and specific knowledge.

As previously defined, foresight may offer noteworthy tangible **benefits** for tourism planning. First, it systematizes the debate about future prospects for tourism development amongst a wide variety of agents through building up plausible and coherent future visions. Second, it helps to formulate viable, innovative tourism strategies that can reconcile the viewpoints of a wide range of stakeholders. Third, it forms expert networks to exchange and disseminate knowledge deriving from the foresight exercises amongst stakeholders and political decision-makers.

In spite of the above-mentioned advantages, foresight may also have clear **disadvantages** for tourism planning. In the first place, foresight cannot tackle or resolve all the social, economic, environmental and political problems within a tourism destination. Second, foresight cannot impose consensus where there are deep disagreements between tourism stakeholders. Third, foresight is not a quick remedy for urgent problems because it requires long analyses and the establishment of expert networks that do not produce immediate results. Finally, foresight demands certain policies that may be difficult to implement in emerging public institutions with little real power.

In contrast to traditional planning processes, which tend to have a limited sectoral scope, foresight gradually builds up an integrated vision of the possible future through participation methods. Foresight is thus complementary to the established planning processes, feeding into them new elements and values, empowering local agents and providing legitimacy to territorial strategies.

Foresight methods are spreading progressively and are becoming a decisive element in many planning exercises. This trend is determined by fast and unpredictable changes experienced by society, markets, technology and science. A dynamic and sometimes turbulent environment puts enormous pressure on rational planning systems, which have been frequently designed to simulate highly stable and predictable functional systems. Therefore, foresight methods represent an emerging approach that works with few technical constraints and shows an increased adaptability to environmental changes.

Applying Foresight for Planning and Designing Tourist Destinations

Despite its apparent benefits, foresight is either simply ignored or just perceived as a trivial set of tools that do not provide much added value to the tourism planning process. On the one hand, most foresight exercises made by social scientists are usually based in general narratives that are intellectually stimulant, but are rarely of much help to tourism planners for taking physical design decisions. On the other hand, when looking at the future, tourism planners tend to focus on forecasting tools, disregarding most foresight methods as frivolous exercises.

In order to bring over foresight techniques to tourism planners, new contributions are needed to reinforce qualitative instruments so that the quality and detail of their outputs (visions or scenarios) will enable them to be used as inputs for quantitative and spatial tools. Consequently, an approach is presented hereby to test the applicability of foresight tools to planning and designing tourist destinations. The proposed approach displays how to translate a future vision into practical strategies to guide tourism development in the long-term. This approach is made up of three sequential steps:

Step 1: Formulation of future visions. Traditional foresight tools, such as visioning or scenario design, are used to create future visions of the global tourist demand.

Step 2: Implications on the destination's general strategy. Once the visions are formulated, functional implications are determined which display the overall strategy that must be followed by the tourism destination to become successful in a competitive market.

Step 3: Implications on the destination's physical design. The inception of a general strategy provides plenty of clues for establishing a set of physical design guidelines, in the form of parameters and qualitative recommendations, for developing a destination.

Though this approach is not new in a strict sense, since most of the proposed steps have been used in tourism planning, its uniqueness comes out because all the elements are used in an articulated and coherent way, having a foresight exercise as a starting point. This approach rests on an ongoing and systematic participation process with tourism experts and local stakeholders. The three methodological steps are developed in the following sections through a fictitious exercise in which future demand requirements are determined for the design of generic sun and beach destinations.

Step 1: Formulation of Future Visions

Recent foresight exercises undertaken for the Spanish sector (*OPTI*, 2005; *OPTI*, 2008) revealed that there will two major demand segments that will clearly dominate the tourism market in the 2020 horizon: "Niche and Innovative Demand" and "Massive and Predictable Demand". Those visions were expressed in narrative form.

Segment A: "Niche and Innovative Demand" (2020)

Segment A will correspond to travellers who will have satisfied their economic and social needs, and who will be searching for self-esteem and self-fulfilment during their trip. Travel motivations will be influenced by their sophisticated life style, their high educational level and their open attitude toward different cultures. In this segment, numerous demand micro segments will coexist, characterised by their great diversity and complexity. Each micro segment will be small in number and oriented to very specific products. Differences among micro segments values and needs will be significant.

Members of Segment A will be very demanding about the quality of tourism services and facilities, but also about the sophistication and innovation of the tourist experience. Therefore, the innovative traveller will be ready to assume risks during his trips as far as the final experience is satisfactory. This tourist profile will be very exigent, but at the same time will be ready to spend more in products and services. In brief, Segment A will correspond to a very experimented, sophisticated and versatile traveller, who will act as a strong prescriber to other travellers.

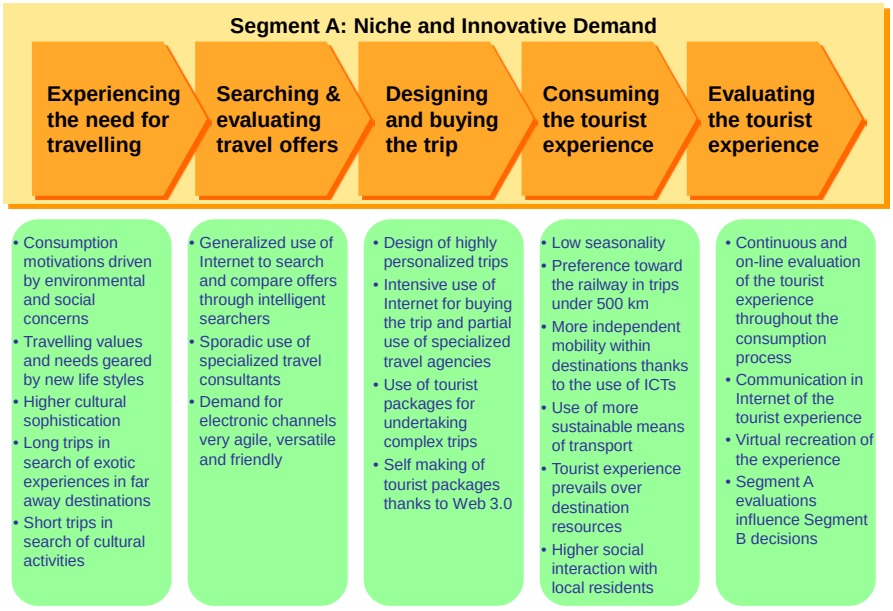
As stated in **Figure 1,** the consumption pattern of Segment A will show strong motivation for travelling to alternative destinations that satisfy his high expectations toward the quality of tourism experience. Travel motivations will be marked by a strong emotional load and they will be generated through innovative marketing tools. Social values will influence tourist motivations and they will be driven by concepts like spirituality, authenticity, identity, solidarity, sustainability, etc. Whatever his background, Segment A will demand destinations more sustainable and with lesser social differences.

Segment B: "Massive and Predictable Demand" (2020)

This profile will be made up of large tourist segments, well differentiated among them in terms of geographical origin and socio-demographic structure. Under this group much experienced tourist segments from Western countries coexist with less travelled segments from emerging countries. Segment B is less sophisticated and capricious than A, however, it demands high quality and reliability in the services provided. He demands tourism products well tested as well as destinations that are massively consumed. In other words, he does not like surprises or risky experiments.

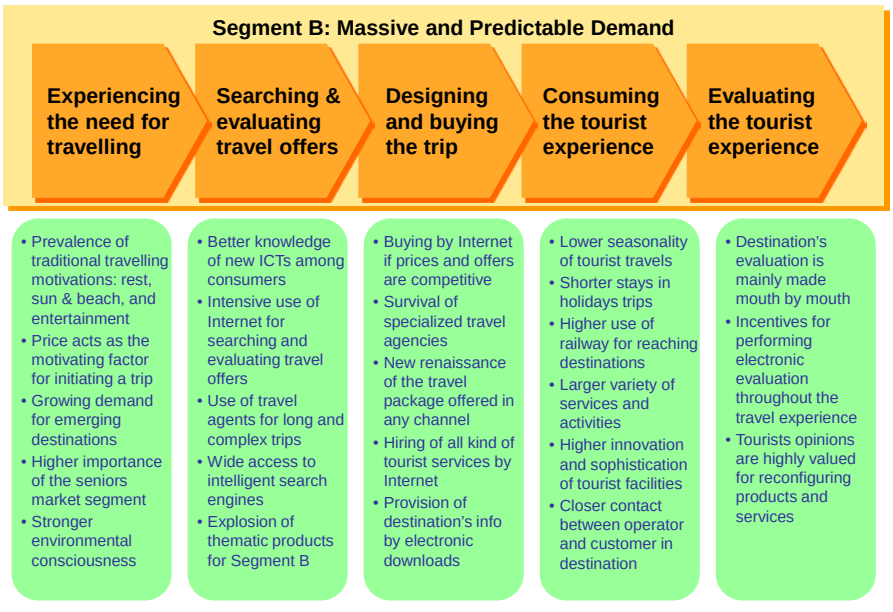
Massive and Predictable Demand will not disappear at all from the tourist market; on the contrary, despite experiencing a lesser growth than Segment A, it will still be the most voluminous segment. As it has been in the past, most families with children and tourist groups will nurture the rank and file of Segment B. One of the most dynamic groups of Segment B will be the "seniors", people older than 60, who will travel more than before and will have more diverse and demanding travelling needs.

Figure 1: Segment A consumption value chain (2020)



SOURCE: *OPTI, 2008, and author's elaboration*

Figure 2: Segment B consumption value chain (2020)



SOURCE: *OPTI, 2008, and author's elaboration*

As shown in **Figure 2**, this type of demand will keep his traditional motivations for travelling -- relax, beach, recreation and escape from routine--; however, price will increasingly act as the motivator factor for travelling. Seasonal trips to beach destinations will still be a priority for this segment; however, tourists will increasingly try emerging destinations in order to get better price/quality offers. Segment B will experience a growing environmental consciousness, though not as intense and explicit

as Segment A. Many tour operators will carry out campaigns to make aware tourists of environmental costs generated by their travels. Just as well, sustainability will become a major tag in most destinations marketing strategies.

Despite its differences, both segments may coincide in the same destination and in the same person. On the one hand, the same destination may offer tourism products oriented to highly specialised demand segments, while at the same time it may attend the needs of mass demand segments. On the other hand, the same person may behave as Segment A when it travels by himself or with his couple, while he may behave as Segment B when travelling with his family group. Obviously, these two segments do not reflect the large complexity and variety of global tourism demand; however, both segments can be easily broken into multiple sub segments that respond to geographic, socio-demographic and income differences.

Step 2: Implications on Destination's General Strategy

After having anticipated the two major demand segments that will prevail in the global tourist market in the year 2020 horizon, implications were determined for the general development strategy that should be followed by sun and beach destinations.

Segment A requirements should be met by the following destination's strategies:

- *Products specialization*. A "Niche and Innovative Demand" will require a wide portfolio of specialised products in which sun and beach attractions will be combined with complementary offers such as golf, horse riding, nautical sports, spas, cultural activities, etc.

- *Wider choice of destinations.* Segment A will demand different types of destinations. Some tourists will be looking for "authentic places", which preserve the original ambience of a village or the pristine conditions of a beach or marine ecosystem. On the contrary, some other tourists will enjoy more "artificial and hedonist destinations", where highly specialised and luxurious services will be provided.

- *Generation of synergies among destinations.* High level demands from Segment A will force to provide additional attractions to the standard ones that can be found in traditional beach destinations. In this respect, it will be advisable to forge alliances among other seaside municipalities and to promote synergies with in-land attractions located in the vicinity.

- *Promotion based on differentiation*. For attracting Segment A to a destination it will be of no use to undertake generic and massive promotion campaigns; on the contrary, potential visitors will be hooked by specific promotional messages attuned with their preferences. In consequence, promotional strategies will be much focussed on specific market segments, differential tourist brands will be created, advertising campaigns will be adapted to each product and market niche, and qualitative aspects will prevail over the price factor.

- *Continuous market reposition*. Segment A's strong dynamism and extreme volatility will force mature destinations to adapt to changing market demands in order to extend their life-cycle. To do so, destinations will need tourism observatories capable of making reliable predictions about future trends and anticipating competitors' movements. In this context, local business will have to be very flexible to adapt on a continuous base to a changing environment.

- *Wide-spread use of new technologies*. Segment A preferred commercialization channel will be Internet. Web portals will segment tourist according to their life styles in order to determine their specific motivations and to match their demands with destinations offerings. Most destinations will have their own Internet portal where tourists will be able to find all kind of

information about attractions, services, transport, etc. Tourists' evaluations will be captured and disseminated on specialised webs that will be attuned to specific life styles.

- *Intense public-private cooperation*. For promoting and selling small sun destinations in the global markets, it will be necessary an intense cooperation among private business and public bodies. The role of public agents will be to guarantee the destination's brand image, to act as protectors of consumers' rights and to impulse new enterprises. On the other hand, private agents will have to provide high quality services while preserving the natural environment.

Segment B requirements should be met by the following destination's strategies:

- *Reinvention of the sun and beach model*. Strong competition from low-cost exotic destinations will force traditional sun and beach destinations to reinvent their model by emphasizing the quality of their offerings. The new strategy should be based on: improving destination's sustainability; diminishing congestion rates; differentiating tourist products and services; extending complementary services; developing exclusive attractions.

- *Development of new products*. In line with the new strategy, sun and beach destinations will have to develop new products that satisfy emerging massive demands with quality services. Thematic destinations that provide more entertainment and emotion will be welcomed by Segment B. Added value to sun and beach products will be provided by offering sport activities, cultural events, shopping facilities and night recreation.

- *Focus on family and elderly sub segments.* Sun and beach destinations will pay priority attention to family and elderly sub segments by specializing and differentiating their facilities. This type of demand may prefer the "all-included-service-model".

- *Provision of safety conditions.* One of the most important requirements of a massive holiday destination will be to provide visitors with good safety conditions regarding health, crime and legal protection. This will be a key condition for those destinations specialized in servicing retired and elderly persons.

- *Highly integrated quality systems*. The big size and complexity of destinations together with the large volume of visitors generated by Segment B will require the implementation of highly integrated quality systems to run efficiently the whole tourism chain of value.

- *Multi-channel promotion*. Increasing international competence will force destinations to use aggressive promotional strategies. Multiple communication channels and new multimedia technologies will be employed to promote tourist products. Advertising campaigns will be massive, but centred in macro segments and tour operators. Powerful and well-differentiated brands that encompass several tourism destinations will be developed with the support of public institutions.

- *Massive use of information and communications technologies.* Segment B destinations will employ powerful technological platforms to provide visitors with on-line and continuously updated information about attractions, accommodations, services, transport schedules, etc. Visitors will be able to access to this wide array of information through their personal electronic devices or through public electronic terminals.

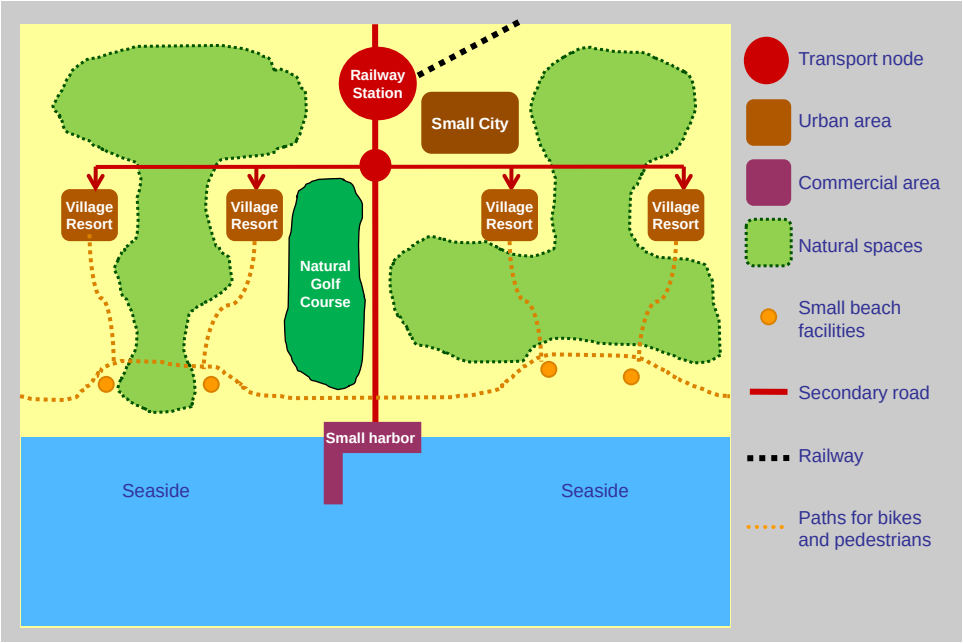
- *Intense coordination among businesses and public administrations.* Although Segment B will be usually attended by big service providers capable of serving by themselves large volumes of visitors, business will need to coordinate their actions with local authorities. Effective coordination among private agents and public bodies will ensure the right planning and management of large and complex tourist destinations.

Step 3: Implications on Destination's Physical Design

After having formulated general strategies that sun and beach destinations should implement to satisfy Segments A and B requirements, spatial patterns for designing destinations were described and visualized. Each of the following spatial patterns represents a physical design model taken to an extreme; therefore, these patterns should be considered as mere working hypotheses.

The physical design guidelines for **Segment A** are as follows (see **Figure 3**):

Figure 3: Physical design guidelines for Segment A (2020)



SOURCE: *Author's elaboration*

- *Development of small and medium size destinations in the coast.* Segment A will show clear preferences toward destinations of medium and small scale, located in the sea line or inland zones close to the coast. Chosen locations will be distant from massive tourism centres. Destinations will limit their growth capacity, will be oriented to specific niche markets and will try to promote the highest added value activities during visitors stay.

- *Integral planning and management of destinations*. Sun and beach destinations will be planned in a comprehensive way, achieving an adequate balance among spatial, social and economic objectives. Tourist destinations will have to be respectful with the local landscape. Real estate and business projects will not look for short-term profitability, but for medium and long-term profits. To achieve these goals, it will be necessary to pursue the greatest consensus level with local stakeholders and residents when planning a tourism destination.

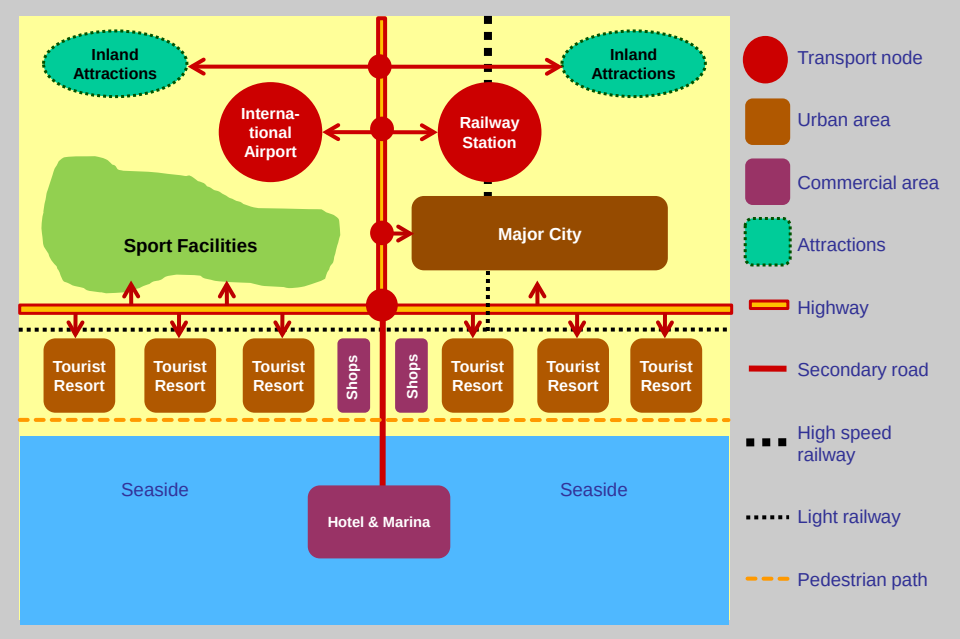
- *Respectful accessibility and sustainable mobility at destinations.* Average tourists of Segment A will reject mega airport and railway infrastructures to access final destinations, while they will feel more comfortable with medium or small size transport facilities. Within destinations, tourists' mobility will be mostly provided by public transport and non-motorised vehicles. Electric vehicles will a popular transportation mean to move around destinations.

- *Development of light basic infrastructures*. Segment A will favour basic infrastructures that are light and sustainable in order to minimize environmental impacts along the coast. Special emphasis will be put in developing renewable energy systems that guarantee energy autonomy, integrated water cycle infrastructures and small scale waste recycling systems.

- *Integration of urban structures in the landscape*. Demand will expect all urban structures to be respectfully integrated in the seaside landscape and adapted to the original urban settlements. Therefore, rehabilitation of old buildings will prevail over the construction of new structures, bioclimatic architecture will be strongly recommended, big and massive structures that generate adverse visual impacts will be forbidden.

Regarding **Segment B**, the physical design guidelines are the following (see **Figure 4**):

Figure 4: Physical design guidelines for Segment B (2020)



SOURCE: *Author's elaboration*

- *Integrated planning of the coast line*. The high complexity of services and infrastructures required by massive sun and beach destinations will give place to a strong public intervention to minimize environmental and social impacts. It will be necessary to undertake an integrated planning effort for the entire coast line in order to ensure the right location and dimension of large tourist destinations. Strict limits to destinations carrying capacities will be imposed to minimize adverse environmental impacts. Integral planning will be based in intense public-private coordination and in effective citizen participation procedures.

- *Strait transport connection with tourists' home markets*. Massive tourism demand will require fast transport connections between home countries and final destinations. Strait connection with distant markets will be provided by regional airports that can take in regular and low-cost airlines. Connection with domestic markets will be facilitated by high-speed railways.

- *Provision of intense and sustainable mobility at destinations.* Segment B will demand adequate transport infrastructures and services so as to visit attractions in the vicinity of the beach destination. In order to avoid traffic congestion within destinations, public transport system will be provided by light railways and electric mini-buses, and the use of non-motorized vehicles will be promoted. Ample pedestrian zones will be developed around commercial areas and along the sea side.

- *Optimization of basic infrastructures*. Massive sun and beach tourism will require a wide offer of basic infrastructures (water, energy, waste, telecom, etc.) capable of handling the needs of large volumes of visitors without threatening the destination's sustainability. With the purpose

of optimizing its operational costs, infrastructures will have to be designed to attend average demands and not peak demands. Tourism seasonality will have to be smoothed.

- *Preservation of the natural and urban landscape*. Although visitors from Segment B may not be as environmentally conscious as Segment A, under no circumstances they will accept polluted beaches, deteriorated landscapes or rundown destinations. Quality of public spaces (sea promenades, pedestrian zones, parks, community facilities, etc.) will be a key element to articulate diverse hotel, commercial and residential complexes.

- *Toward new residential models*. Real estate products based on the mix of apartments + hotels + golf will evolve toward more sophisticated models in which residential and recreational uses will be designed to comply with strict sustainability criteria so as to minimize consumption of energy and water resources. Fiscal incentives will stimulate residential time-sharing formulas in order to smooth destinations' seasonality and stop the urbanizing process.

Findings

Despite the limited content of this paper, some tentative conclusions can be extracted from experiences gathered during recent research activities related to the tourism sector. These findings mainly refer to the opportunity of employing foresight methods and techniques in tourism planning.

Firstly, the proposed foresight method appears to be user-friendly for local decision makers and quite manageable for technicians. Although the approach is process-oriented, it generates a tangible product –future visions, general strategies and physical design guidelines-- to which people can easily refer to and understand.

Secondly, this foresight approach may be welcomed by both strategic and physical planners. On the one hand, it offers a comprehensive future vision of tourism demand and its business implications, and on the other hand, it displays spatial solutions.

Thirdly, quantitative analysis can lend coherence and credibility to foresight exercises, but modelling tools should support the process and not drive it. Despite its shortcomings, a foresight method like the one proposed here should not lose its eminent qualitative nature.

Fourthly, this exercise transmits the power of foresight tools for knowledge dissemination and for the establishment of expert networks, which all together can help improve a destination's governance.

In summary, this exercise shows the potential of foresight to deal with tourism development issues plagued with complexity and uncertainty, as well as its capability to bring down analysis from global challenges to local and spatial implications. Obviously, the proposed approach needs additional development and refinement; but when this is achieved, chances are that foresight will elicit less technical scepticism among tourism planners.

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